I am about to ask you to bear a load of definitions in order to get my point across. I hope you will stay with me. We often use the term *bunkai* to mean application. Actually *oyo* is closer to application and *bunkai* is closer to “example” or “analysis”. *Analysis* is from the Greek for “loosen up” and *example* is from the Latin for “take out”. Thus, analysis is “loosening” something into pieces for further study while “taking out” sections on which to concentrate. Traditional karate-ka are used to interpreting, or at least having their sensei interpret, kata. *Interpret* is a word that comes from the Old French for “explain” or “translate”. *Explain* is from the Latin for “make plain” and *translate* also comes from the Latin for “carry across”.

As karate-ka, we talk about explaining, translating, or interpreting the kata. I think only the final word, interpreting, is accurate, however. The kata has various interpretations because there is no precise explanation or translation. There may be poor translations, to be sure, but as with translating poetry, there can be more than one good interpretation. And that is the strength of kata.

I have edged us into a subject at which many martial artists would balk with greater trepidation than if entering a biker bar at happy hour wearing a chartreuse bowtie. What scary subject do I have in mind to relate to kata? (Here insert music from *Jaws.*) Why, it is poetry. Martial artists balk because poetry supposedly has no valid relationship to what they really value: not karate kata itself, but the applications from kata.

Poetry smacks of cute and indirectly expressed stuff you learned in seventh grade because Mrs. McGillicuddy thought it would round out your character while karate applications feel like you’re standing up for yourself when a push becomes a shove and the shover couldn’t care less about whether you could interpret a poem or whether you knew the Greek, Latin, or Old French roots of common words. But Mrs. McGillicuddy was right and that’s why, in my humble opinion, some martial artists are still unrounded seventh graders when it comes to karate.

Consider that all poems worth their meter must be interpreted. That’s exactly why high school football players don’t like them. “If you wanna say something, just say it,” is their attitude. But that’s like saying, “If you wanna get a touchdown, just get the ball to the end zone.” *How* poetry works is more important than *what* it says. Since, to football players, *that* you get the ball to the end zone is more important than *how*, the proprieties of poetry seem nonsensical. The contrast works if you substitute “martial artist” for “football player”. In the world of self-defense, *how* one defends oneself is less important than the *fact* that one defends oneself. But martial artists often forget that they learn their *martial* (the “what”) through their *art* (the “how”) and they learn their art, whether they like it or not, through methods that relate to interpreting another art—poetry.

Traditional martial arts are fading fast because the high-school-football-player-martial artist has, for now at least, become more popular than the martial artist who can understand poetry. The first thing to be dismissed in the popular martial practices of today is kata. Cage fighters don’t practice kata. Instead they figure out how to
beat the next guy on the card. Outside the cage, however, self-defense and self-development do not show up on the third Sunday in November because of previous contractual obligations. Self-defense shows up when least expected, and self-development never fails to show up every day.

If we are to carry martial traditions across to the next generation, we must have means that preserve both the nature of the budo and the health of the recipient. The two methods martial artists use to transport their traditions are predetermined waza (technique) and traditional kata (forms). The aikido, aiki-ju-jutsu, ju-jutsu, and kempo stylists that work exclusively with waza also employ henka (variations) to fill the gaps where the curriculum is thin. Alternately, the karate-ka and kobudo-ka (weaponry specialists) that work with kata draw waza from their kata. Many people think kata is a tradition that can easily be replaced by waza: after all, waza requires interpersonal action that is more like self-defense than the solo dance of kata. This is a fair assumption, but often, martial artists see the trees and think there must be a forest when really it’s a rather tall hedge. Kata concentrates techniques (waza) so that a single solo motion can be translated to many self-defense interactions. In this way, the kata gives almost unlimited variety.

Consider some poetic devices and how they relate to kata. Poetry may have alliteration (the repetition of initial consonant sounds) and assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds) while kata repeats movements or sets of movements in certain rhythmic patterns. Poetry has meter (the recurrence of stressed and unstressed syllables) while kata has stressed and unstressed movements. Onomatopoeia is the use of words that imitate sound; in karate it is called a kiai. Rhyme is the similarity of ending sounds existing between two words, where kata has similarly ending stanza (lit. rooms, i.e. sections) of a single kata or between several kata.

The device most associated with poetry however is metaphor (a comparison between two objects with the intent of giving clearer meaning to one of them). Educated martial artists, eager to carry across the traditions of translating (i.e. carrying across) kata, may not know that metaphor comes from two Greek words that mean, ironically, “to carry across”.

More about kata, poetry, and Mrs. McGillicuddy next week.